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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 RABAT 001169

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG, NEA/PI, DRL/IRF AND DRL/NESCA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/18/2023

TAGS: PHUM PGOV PTER PINR KISL IT MO

SUBJECT: AL ADL WA IHSAN: MOROCCO'S ISLAMIST DISSIDENTS GOING LEGIT?

REF: A. RABAT 462  
1B. 07 RABAT 1838

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Classified By: Ambassador Thomas T. Riley for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The banned Islamist religio-political organization Al Adl wal-Ihsan (Adl) (more commonly known as the Justice and Charity or Justice and Good Works Organization) may be moving toward political participation, perhaps as a legal political party. Adl spokesman Fatallah Arsalane highlighted Adl's political project to PolCouns December 11. Noting stability is Adl's key goal, he denounced terrorism and violence, while protesting ongoing repression. Democratic politics was meaningless, he said, given the powerlessness of Parliament and royal absolutism, but he did not challenge the legitimacy of the monarchy. Arsalane echoed Adl's charismatic Sufi leader Abdelsallam Yassine's public disavowal last summer of Adl's historic call for a Caliphate, reinforced by the Sheikh's suspension of outreach, reported December 15. In their often symbolic dialogue, the authorities transmitted some positive signals of their own, while still holding some Adl members in jail. Were Adl to accept the monarchy and become legal, it could enhance stability but it could also increase Islamic influence on Moroccan politics. Arsalane closed by extending a hand to the new U.S. administration, urging changes in policies toward the region. End summary.

¶2. (C) Al Adl wal-Ihsan (Adl) spokesman and executive committee (Majlis al Shura) member Fatallah Arsalane and Hassab Bennajeh, the director of Adl's public relations office, met with PolCouns and Casablanca PolOff (notetaker) at Arsalane's home in Rabat on December 11. Arsalane was welcoming and spoke openly and at length about Adl's political aspirations and its difficult relationship with the GOM.

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Adl: "Stability" and Good Works  
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¶3. (C) Arsalane began discussing the organization by stressing, "Our first goal, above all others, is the stability of Morocco." Both left and right have failed,

leaving only Islam as a model. Within Islam there are moderates and extremists and, "we have chosen moderation." He said Adl wanted to work with other groups and political parties to help pull Morocco out of the political, social and economic crises it now faces.

¶4. (C) Adl is best known for its grassroots organizational abilities and for its social welfare programs among the poor urban Moroccans. Arsalane admitted that Adl's social programs were a source of its popularity, which was based more on Adl's message and ideas. The government ban on Adl's offering these services has only increased Adl's popularity. (Note: We have heard many of these efforts continue under the guise of Adl-related independent NGOs. Adl also has focused on youth; it gained control of the student unions of most Moroccan universities and the national organization of students. Its activists on campus continue to harass more secular students.)

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Repression and Dialogue: An evolving Approach  
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¶5. (C) Arsalane reported that GOM repression of Adl is widespread and includes bans on all public activities as well as all publications. In recent years police have raided private meetings in homes, but many of activities are tolerated. His own house was kept under surveillance and he was confident that his phones were tapped, but was unconcerned, noting, "We have nothing to hide." (Note: As we departed, an apparent surveillance team of three made a choreographed exit of their vehicle, parked just behind our embassy car, making sure we noticed. End note.)

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¶6. (C) Arsalane acknowledged that Adl had over the years maintained informal communication with the Moroccan regime. This was only rarely direct, and more often one-way and symbolic. He contended that the "undemocratic regime" was unwilling to engage in a more open and formal dialogue, maintained political red lines and imposed conditions on allowing Adl greater scope for activity. "In Morocco we have the motto: 'God, Nation, King' but in fact the only thing that matters here is the King."

¶7. (C) When asked about the historic support of Adl for a Caliphate or Islamic state, Arsalane said this was not Adl's position, claiming legitimacy and authority comes from the people and the Ulema. He thus substantiated the major but largely unremarked turnaround on this basic question by Sheikh Yassine during an interview this summer with the Arabic satellite TV channel Hiwar that opened the door to Adl's potential acceptance of the monarchy -- albeit not in its current state.

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Condemning the Use of Violence  
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¶8. (C) Arsalane insisted that Adl was a political organization, and opposition to violence was a key principle. Adl also demanded that its members reject violence and expelled those who did not. He acknowledged that one participant in a failed bombing of a tour bus in Meknes in 2007 had once been a member, but claimed that the bomber had been out of Adl for a long time before the incident. Unprompted, Arsalane raised the detention and subsequent release, at the end of November, of 11 Moroccan immigrants in Italy, including members of Adl. Arsalane strongly rejected that these members were involved in terrorism and charged the Italian police were well aware of their activities. He contended that the arrests took place at the instigation of the Moroccan government, which unable to prove any wrongdoing, falsely continued to try to paint Adl members as terrorists. Arsalane contrasted Adl to Salafist groups truly

bent on terrorist violence. "We reject these extremists ... they are against us and call us 'kufar' (non-believers)." He insisted that Adl regularly condemned terrorist attacks.

¶19. (C) PolCouns urged that Adl be more vocal in its condemnation of terrorist attacks, such as the 2007 suicide attacks against the U.S. Consulate General and other sites in Casablanca, and other terrorist attacks around the world. Arsalane responded that Adl in fact had denounced the 2003 Casablanca attacks, all terrorist attacks in Morocco and many elsewhere.

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Intra-party dialogue on its Political Role  
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¶10. (C) Arsalane noted that there is a constant dialogue within Adl about the extent to which the movement should participate in elections or the political process. He recounted that in 1981 Adl had asked to become a political party, but the GOM refused. In the lead up to the 2007 parliamentary elections, Adl decided not to participate because it believed that the Parliament does not have any real power to effect change. "It does not matter which party is in power, even the Party of Justice and Development (PJD)." If the GOM were now to allow Adl to become a political party, Arsalane averred they would accept.

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Relations with the PJD  
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¶11. (C) Arsalane characterized Adl's relationship with PJD as respectful but denied that there is any active political cooperation except on Arab/international issues, such as Palestine and Iraq, as in their recent joint demonstrations in Tangier against a visit by senior Israeli officials.  
(Comment: It is unclear just how much the undeclared Adl

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boycott of the 2007 parliamentary elections contributed to the abysmally low turnout. If Adl members had voted for the PJD, the PJD might have fulfilled the many predictions that it would emerge as the largest party, and would have been in a position to form the government. So in the convoluted logic of Moroccan politics, this boycott served the regime's purpose. End comment.)

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Succession of Sheikh Yassine  
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¶12. (C) We asked about what would happen after the death of Adl's charismatic leader, "Sheikh" Ahmed Yassine, reportedly 80 and poor health. Arsalane said that Adl has internal rules governing succession, which would be decided by an election of its executive committee (Majlis Ash-Shura).

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A Message to the New American Government  
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¶13. (C) Like virtually all our Moroccan interlocutors, Arsalane expressed interest in the incoming U.S. administration and asked that we convey a message to it. First, he said, the USG should stop supporting dictatorial regimes in the region and encourage them to be more democratic. The USG, in his view, has spoken much about principles of freedom and democracy but has observed them only when there was no conflict with U.S. regional interests. Second, he urged that the incoming administration devote its energy from outset to helping solve the Palestinian issue which would help solve many of the other problems in the region. Finally, he noted that prior to 9/11 many in the Islamic world aspired to visit the United States. Since then, however, many across the region, particularly moderate

Islamists, are afraid to visit, because they believe that USG will falsely accuse and imprison them at behest of their repressive home governments. He also hoped some intervention could be made on behalf of party members he claimed were falsely convicted of homicide in Morocco and have gone a long way towards serving their 20-year sentences.

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The all-Embracing Makhzen opens a door  
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¶14. (C) For its part, the authorities have responded with some positive signals to Adl's overtures. While the newspaper remains banned, there appears to be less tampering with the well-constructed Adl website ([www.aljamaa.net](http://www.aljamaa.net) in French and Arabic). Arrests continue but appear to be diminishing in both frequency and scope. The prosecution of Nadia Yassine, the Sheikh's daughter, for verbal assault on the monarchy continues to be delayed. (Note: Arsalane described this as equivalent to judicial supervision.) In another step, earlier in the week Minister of Endowments and Islamic Affairs Ahmed Toufiq paid a condolence call on the family of a recently deceased Adl Board member and close companion of Yassine, whom Toufiq knew long ago in a common Sufi brotherhood, a visit that likely required palace assent.

¶15. (U) On December 15, media reported that Sheikh Yassine decreed that the organization would suspend all public activity, assemblies, meetings, etc., apparently to avoid any confrontation with the authorities. (Note: This is in context of, and may be an attempt to insulate Adl from, a current GOM crackdown against Islamic extremists.)

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Comment  
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¶16. (C) Arsalane represents an apparently growing tendency within Adl that is eager to engage more actively in the political life of the country. In contrast to past expressions of religio-political identity, he clearly acknowledged its principally political nature and

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aspirations, pointedly making little or no reference to it being a religious body. It is unclear to what extent Sheikh Yassine's own epiphany is behind this evolution of the movement, or whether he is reflecting the wishes of the politicized next generation, be it Arsalane and his politicized cohort or the sheikh's daughter Nadia Yassine -- who appear to be rivals. There has been widespread speculation that after the sheikh's death there will be a split in the organization. It now seems clear that either way the politicos will dominate, with the religious element possibly becoming a parallel organization, as is the case with the PJD and its religious counterpart the Movement for Unity and Reform (MUR).

¶17. (C) Although Arsalane was adamant that the GOM/Palace has not engaged in a formal dialogue with Adl, it is clear that an understanding is developing between them. The GOM has tolerated the activities of Adl so long as it did not press the question of the king's legitimacy or take steps to mobilize its followers against regime. Some analysts believe that Adl has played a critical role as a release valve for social and political tensions through a non-violent organization. Certainly, Adl exploited these frustrations to swell its ranks. The GOM periodically alleges Adl involvement in violent or terrorist activities, as it apparently did in Italy, but has presented no evidence for this. All indications appear to substantiate Adl's commitment to avoid violence.

¶18. (C) Adl's potential buy-in to the system could have an important effect on enhancing stability in Morocco, just at a time when it is under pressure due to the global economic

downturn. It would also, however, increase Islamic influence on politics, adding to the leverage of the PJD, but even together, Islamists would almost certainly remain a minority. Like most politics here, this potential "conversion" to legitimacy will remain for some time obscure, and play out only over time. End comment.

¶19. (C) Note A: The last time mission has had contact with Arsalane was before 9/11/2001, and the government protested. We have heard no such protest so far. We have avoided contact with Nadia Yassine since her indictment, and have been in touch only at a lower level.

¶20. (SBU) Note B: Al Adl wal-Ihsan has frequently been translated as the Justice and Charity Organization, with the familiar acronym JCO. In fact, the organization itself prefers the translation Justice and Spirituality. While perhaps the best translation of the Islamic concept of Ihsan would be "good works," the term encompasses that notion as well as charity and the performance of spiritual acts. Following local press usage, we plan to continue to use Adl (Justice). End Notes.

¶21. (U) This cable was drafted by Casablanca PolOff and has been cleared with the Consulate General.

¶22. (U) Tripoli minimize considered.

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